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ABSTRACT

This report describes the operation of a mother and toddler group, one of several activities of 123 House, a community-based project in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The basic aim of the mother and toddler group, which operates 5 mornings a week, is to give mothers a chance to socialize. On 2 mornings, various courses are offered. Throughout the 4 years of its operation, the group has attracted 140 women. To evaluate the project, a large scale research program was conducted (from which this report is drawn). Methods included interviews with 25 of the women who attended the group as well as discussion with project staff and observation of participating children. The women indicated that they initially used the group to find companionship and get a break from their children, but the interviews also revealed that they had benefitted from the project in many different respects, social, educational, and personal. A sense of informality and mutual support contributed to the success of the group. A creche is operated as part of the mother and toddler group. Mothers believe the creche is valuable in providing company for their toddlers, and results in various benefits to their children's development. In the creche, children engage in informal games, art activities, and pretend play. Recommendations for operating a mother and toddler group are offered. A brief bibliography is included, and a list of resources useful for organizing a mother and toddler group is provided. (BC)

MORE THAN JUST "A BIT OF PEACE AND QUIET"

A Case study of a mother and toddler group in Belfast

by
Nicola McIldoon

More than "a bit of peace and quiet"
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Nicola McIldoon
1991

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INTRODUCTION

There are a growing number of mother and toddler groups springing up in a variety of settings throughout Northern Ireland. As a whole, however, the mother and toddler movement has received minimal attention from researchers, with the result that relatively little has been written about these groups, either in terms of how they operate on a day-to-day basis, or in view of their overall value to the parents and children who use them. This lack of general information has two outcomes. The first is that, knowing little of the true value of their work, and in face of financial constraints, policy-makers and funders have tended to ignore the activities of mother and toddler groups. Consequently many are forced to operate with limited support. The second issue concerns the fact that, without any kind of written information about such projects, those who wish to establish a new facility are repeatedly having to 'invent the wheel', without the benefit of learning from the experiences of others who have already done something similar.

More than "a bit of peace and quiet" attempts to go some way in addressing these problems, by providing a case-study of a mother and toddler group, based in a community project - 123 House - in Belfast. The report has two aims. Firstly, it is written to draw attention to the importance which such a group can have for the parents and children who attend, by highlighting some of the benefits of using the facility. The second aim relates specifically to those who may be trying to set up a mother and toddler group, or are already involved in running one. Here, the document describes the experience, in 123 House, of actually operating such a facility, pointing to the issues and problems which arose throughout the work, and relating some of the lessons which were learnt. In this, of course, the report recognises that it is impossible to provide any kind of definitive guide to establishing and running a mother and toddler group, as each individual project is unique, and operating under different circumstances. However, it is hoped that description of the work in 123 will provide helpful suggestions and ideas for others to interpret, adapt and utilise within their own particular environments.

Chapter One looks at the background to the case-study: the development of the mother and toddler movement in general, and some information about 123 House. **Chapter Two** focuses on the mothers using the mother and toddler group in 123, and illustrates the value of the facility to them. **Chapter Three** is concerned with the toddlers in the project, and looks at the creche, which operates as an integral part of this particular mother and toddler group.

Chapter Four summarises the main points, and provides some ideas for others to consider. The **Resources** section includes details of a few organisations which may be able to give some support to new and existing mother and toddler groups.

BACKGROUND

Development of the mother and toddler movement

Sociological research is littered with references to some of the stresses and strains of parenting, particularly for mothers, who generally bear primary responsibility for childcare. For women with very young children, especially those below five years of age, such care is usually a fairly individualised act, often undertaken in circumstances of isolation, and can sometimes result in highly negative feelings. Mary Boulton's study, 'On Being a Mother', for example, indicates that, among her sample of women, the features of the 'mother' role - the exclusion from people and activities outside the home, the heavy burden of work and responsibility, and the enforced tie between mother and children - contributed to frustration, resentment and irritation (1983:119). Similarly, the women in Sue Sharpe's study of mothers revealed a lack of confidence, loss of self-esteem and feelings of dependence when they were at home with their children. She concludes that mothering *"often takes place in conditions that amount to severe social deprivation, where women may be cut off from other adults, from outside interests, from adult conversation and other stimulation, and are potentially vulnerable to depression and other psychological disorders"* (1984:39-40). This last point is verified by writers such as Brown and Harris (1978), who have indicated increased susceptibility to clinical depression among mothers of young children.

The mother and toddler movement grew out of a recognition of these problems, and aimed to reduce some of the isolation which mothers might feel. An unknown number of groups have been established in a variety of settings, including health centres, community centres and churches. Amongst these, there is some variability in philosophy, ranging, for example, from the statutory services' supportive, preventive or therapeutic work with specific families, to the voluntary sector's greater concern with mutual support and the general relief of family pressure. While the initial rationale for the development of such groups may have been the isolation of women, they also vary considerably in terms of their orientation, with some groups being rather more child-centred than others. Indeed, the traditional emphasis of the mother and toddler movement has been the provision of activities which accomodate mother and child together, rather than separately. In part, of course, the shape of individual groups may be determined by resources, and, given the general lack of funding support for this type of work, many operate with limited premises, equipment and staff.

123 House

The mother and toddler group which this report describes exists as part of a much larger project, 123 House, which is located in a three-storey end-of-terrace house on Cliftonville Road in North Belfast. This is a relatively deprived part of the city, and includes an increasing number of young families, and particularly young children; 23% of the area's population is aged 0-14 years (Belfast Centre for the Unemployed/Belfast City Council: 1989:135-6). The neighbourhood has a high level of unemployment, (around 64% in parts), with the result that a large number of families are dependent on state benefits for their income. More generally, based on indicators such as overcrowding, car ownership and number of single parent families, Cliftonville ranks amongst the thirty most deprived wards in Belfast. The area has seen a lot of disturbance and upheaval over the past few years, from housing redevelopment, but more particularly from the 'Troubles', with North Belfast being the scene of around 20% of all killings in the Province. Despite these difficulties, there are few facilities which cater for families.

123 House was established to meet the needs of parents and children in the Cliftonville area, by providing flexible community-based support. The resource is run on an 'open-door' basis, available to all those from the neighbourhood who wish to use it, but 123 also aims to provide non-threatening, non-stigmatising support for families referred to the project by Social Services and other agencies. Through provision of a number of activities, the House hopes to enable families to cope with various problems, including social isolation, anxiety over children, marital violence, post-natal depression, poverty and unemployment. An important aspect of this work is the recognition that, whilst most families do experience problems at some time, they also have their own strengths and resources for coping. Thus, the project

encourages parents to support one another, through, for example, providing the opportunity to share experiences, while, at the same time, helping them to develop in terms of confidence and self-esteem. Linked to this is the idea that parents have the primary role in relation to their children, and that they should be helped to build upon and utilise their knowledge and skills. In response to this, the House facilitates contact with professionals concerned with childcare and family support - speech therapists and health visitors, for example - but, through such contacts, attempts, as far as possible, to promote a form of professional / parent 'partnership'. As part of a policy of working with, rather than for, families, 123 is based on a participatory model, with users playing a major role in the operation of the project.

The House, which opened in September 1986, initially provided a small playgroup, but since then, it has rapidly developed an extensive range of activities which cater for parents and children at almost every stage of the family life cycle. As a result, 123 is generally open from 9am to 7 or 9pm, Monday to Friday, for most of the year, and attracts up to 170 users per week. Its programme of activities includes:

The **Playgroup**, which opens on five mornings and three afternoons per week, and caters for a total of 28 children, aged three and four years.

The **Mother and Toddler Group**, which operates on five mornings per week, with creche facilities available for the under- threes.

The **Afterschool Club**, which provides play facilities for up to 140 five to twelve year olds, on five afternoons per week.

The **Summer Scheme**, which also caters for five to twelve year olds, and runs for four weeks during the summer, providing activities for about 100 children.

The **Youth Club**, which operates on one evening per week, and is attended by around fourteen 13-16 year olds.

In addition, in the past, a range of **evening classes** for adults, including art, drama and psychology have been held in the House, along with a history workshop and children's 'tin whistle' class.

The project is staffed by a number of full- and part-time workers: a co-ordinator, administrator, playgroup leader, two playgroup assistants, two creche workers, a trainee 'Younghelp' worker, a playworker and three playwork assistants, as well as a few local volunteers. Since 123 House was first initiated, resources to sustain the project, and fund the various posts, have come from a number of sources. A 'Belfast Area of Need' grant enabled the purchase and renovation of the building in which the project is based, and trusts have helped to finance salaries; these have included the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, the John Moores Foundation, the Ireland Fund, the Allen Lane Foundation and the Cadbury Trust. In June 1987, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, a Dutch organisation, concerned with the educational and social development of children throughout the world, agreed to fund six posts, followed, in 1990, by a further four years of reduced funding. This contribution was obviously important in enabling the House to develop rapidly, and provide a greater range of activities, catering for a larger number of users. Given that the resource is used by Social Services, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board have provided funds for the co-ordinator's post, and the Government-sponsored A.C.E. and 'Younghelp' schemes provide several project workers on one-year contracts. The E.H.S.S.B. has also made some contribution towards running costs (electricity, gas, telephone and so on), but more generally, funds for equipment have to be raised through applications to, for example, 'Children in Need', 'Telethon', Belfast Action Team and Belfast City Council. Users of the House have contributed to the project's income through running their own fund-raising events, such as jumble sales, cake sales and discos; a support group of local parents has played a role in organising such activities.

In terms of project management, in line with its policy of participation and involvement, overall responsibility for 123 lies in the hands of a committee, comprised of elected parent-representatives from each section of the House - playgroup, mother and toddler group, afterschool club, youth club, support group and evening activities. The committee is supported and advised by the co-ordinator, a staff representative, an ex-committee member, and an adviser from Social Services, as well as an accountant and solicitor.

The research project

While it was always intended that evaluation would play a role in 123 House, the impetus for a large-scale research programme, (from which this report is drawn), came from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation. As part of its overall funding of the House, the Foundation provided resources for a researcher, based in Queen's University, Belfast, to be employed on a full-time basis, in order to carry out a three- year evaluative study of the project.

The role of the research was to examine the aims and objectives of the House. and the extent to which these were being achieved, as well as the processes involved in the operation of the facility. This entailed looking at the various areas of work within 123 - the playgroup, for instance - and an examination of some wider issues, such as management by local users, participation and relationships with Social Services. The aim was that the evaluation, in accordance with the ethos of the House, would be participatory, with workers and users being involved in the research process. The results would be fed back into the project, to help to develop and improve its work.

The research on the mother and toddler group was part of this overall evaluation plan, and focussed on the ways in which the group was meeting the needs of the parents and children who used it. A variety of research methods were used, including interviews with 25 of the women who attended the group, discussion with project staff and observation of 25 children who used the creche. Preliminary background reading, in preparation for evaluating the project, had revealed a lack of written information about the operation of mother and toddler groups, yet, the research in 123 was beginning to highlight the benefits, to users, of such a facility, as well as some issues concerning its organisation. It was felt that this information should reach a wider audience, to enable others to share, and learn from, the experiences of the House, and, with the support of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, this document was produced.

THE WOMEN

In 123 House, the basic aim of the mother and toddler group was to give women somewhere to go in order to reduce their isolation, provide them with the chance to socialise with adults with similar experiences and to help them make friends. The group was also intended to create the opportunity for women to discuss their problems, find out about resources and services and be part of a mutual support group.

An important requirement for the achievement of these objectives was that a creche facility would be available for the children of mothers who wanted to use the group - relieving women, even temporarily, of some of the pressures of childcare, and thereby giving them time to pursue their own interests. The creche would also be valuable in providing company and stimulation for the children who attended it. While traditionally, the mother and toddler movement had focussed on mother and child together, in 123, it was felt that, although it is useful to consider families as a whole unit, requiring a broad scope of support, parents and children also have very separate and different needs. Thus, it was recognised that time and space can be beneficial for both mother and child, and indeed may ultimately enhance their relationship. As Pugh and De'Ath suggest, *"a mother who is tired, lonely, isolated or depressed, with little self-esteem or feelings of control over her own life is unlikely to respond willingly or positively to her child's needs or demands"* (1984:137).

Getting started

Throughout the early planning and development stages in 123, the co-ordinator had gradually gathered together a list of around eighty women who had shown an interest in attending some form of mother and toddler group. In November 1986, a letter was sent out to each one, inviting her to an introductory meeting in the House, to discuss and organise sessions. Given the limited size of the rooms in the building, and the high level of interest, four separate introductory meetings were held, with about twenty people at each. The mothers had tea and biscuits, met with the co-ordinator and filled in brief application forms (name, address, names and ages of children, special interests). Because the project was based in permanent premises, it was possible to hold a mother and toddler group every day during the week, between 10am and 12pm, but, to prevent overcrowding, either in the mothers' room or in the creche, the women were asked to nominate two particular days when they would wish to use the group.

The mothers were to meet in the top room in 123 House, which was furnished informally, with a sofa, soft chairs and tables, and had a noticeboard for project, and local, information. They also had access to a small kitchen. A nominal fee of about 30p per session was established to cover the cost of tea and coffee, and the juice and biscuits which were given to the children in the creche. In an area with high levels of unemployment, and dependence on benefits, it was important that women should not be deterred, by cost, from using the group.

The style of the mother and toddler group was set at the very beginning by the project co-ordinator, who was keen that the women should feel that the facility was theirs, and that they had control over what went on within it. In fact, this was not necessarily a straightforward task. She found that the mothers' main concern was that they should have a break from their children, but they had never really been asked before about their own individual interests; initially, then, they were unsure, and reluctant to make any suggestions. The co-ordinator played an important role at this stage in encouraging the women to think about, and discuss, the way in which the group could be run, and the activities it might offer.

Following an expressed interest in some form of education classes, in January 1987, contact was made with the Women's Education Project in Belfast, a voluntary organisation which provides tutors and teaching materials for women's groups. Their organiser visited the House and discussed ideas with the co-ordinator and users. This resulted in an introductory course being run, giving two-week 'taster' sessions on assertiveness, women's health and creative writing, followed by two six-week courses on assertiveness and writing. A course on 'Women and Society' was also organised. An important development following this was that a few of the women from the mother and toddler group then received support and training from the WEP, to enable them to tutor classes in the House themselves.

Organisation

The present organisation of the group means that Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays remain quite unstructured and free of classes, to give the women a chance to relax, while the last two days of the week are used to accomodate various courses. The creative writing course, which is now given support by the Worker's Educational Association, has continued since the earliest days, and is held every Friday. Thursdays have been used for a variety of different classes, including crafts and needlework, welfare rights and First Aid. Occasionally during the week, there have been 'one-off' events, such as a pizza-making demonstration by an Italian member of staff. The project has also been visited by external agencies, such as the Eastern Health Board's 'Immunisation Team', a dental therapist, speech therapist and health visitor, and these sessions have provided a useful forum for women and professional workers to discuss relevant health and childcare issues.

This balance of activities is a useful one. The organisation of the group recognises not only the importance of classes, but also the value of providing 'free' time for women to meet and talk, share experiences and help one another. Such time is especially useful for new members, who may need to familiarise themselves with the group before gaining enough confidence to undertake a course, or for those who may not wish to attend classes, but appreciate the company and support which the other users can provide.

Users of the mother and toddler group

Throughout its first four years of operation, the mother and toddler group in 123 House attracted a total of around 140 women. On a daily basis, the group has been used by about ten to twelve women, although numbers do tend to fluctuate according to, for example, the time of the year, or the weather, and, on occasions, as many as 27 women have attended one session.

It is worth pointing out that the group originally started out as a facility for parents and children, but has failed to attract fathers in any number. Only two men have attended the creative writing class, which was widely advertised, and, because it is sponsored by the Worker's Educational Association, is perhaps more likely to be seen as accessible to anyone who wishes to use it. Another father also used the creche for his child, but was reluctant to join the other parents. To a large extent, the failure to attract men is a reflection of the fact that women maintain the bulk of responsibility for childcare. Some discussion with the mothers who use 123 has also indicated that their husbands have a fairly negative view of the group, seeing it as *"a place where women go to 'chime' about men"*. The description of the House, as a facility for parents and children, also seems to have had a negative effect, in that some men appear to have perceived the project, rather disparagingly, as a feminist-oriented facility, and have therefore been unwilling to participate. This lack of male involvement is not atypical, but seems to be the general experience of similar projects, with the result that such groups are used almost exclusively by women.

The women using 123 come mainly from the district around the House - the majority live within walking / pram-pushing distance. However, the group includes women from a range of backgrounds and with a variety of experiences - grandmothers, women with several under-fives, single parents, young first-time mothers, childminders, and women with school-age children. The 25 women in this study demonstrate some of the variation. They ranged in age from 20 to 47 years, and while most were married, the sample also included 3 single women. Fifteen of the women had two or three children, but five mothers had large families, comprising four or more children. There was a wide age range among their children, from the very young (5 months) to over twenty years old. Twenty-one of the mothers had at least one child under five years of age; of these, two-thirds had one child under three. The group of women included five regular childminders, and one occasional minder. All of the mothers had been employed outside the home prior to having children, in various occupations, including factory work, shop work, office work, lab. work, hairdressing and catering. The great diversity amongst the users highlights the fact that the term 'mother and toddler group' should not be taken too literally; rather, such a facility can be seen as providing companionship and support not just to mothers with young children, but to women living in a wide range of circumstances. Those who attend the group are able to share their different experiences, and use these to learn from, and support, one another.

Obviously, to an extent, the membership of the mother and toddler group has changed over time. As a natural stage in the development of family life, mothers have moved on; their children have gone to school, and the women take up paid employment outside the home, for example. But the group in 123 also includes a core of women who have been using the project from its early days and are very regular attenders, and who have, as a result of sustained contact, developed particularly strong friendship networks.

While the aim of the project was that mothers should have the chance to make friends, the development of

these tightly-knit networks can sometimes be problematic. In one sense, a form of 'closing' is necessary to facilitate the development of supportive relationships within the mothers' group, by providing an environment in which women can share problems. At the same time, however, the formation of such relationships can make the group appear 'cliquish', and create difficulties of access for newcomers. For women who may have had little social contact for some time, a lack of confidence can mean that it is quite a large step to join an unfamiliar group, and the bonding of long-term members can act as a barrier to the newcomer's integration into the project. It is important too, of course, to remember that some women may find that they dislike, or are unable to cope with, a group situation; their needs may be better met a one-to-one service, such as 'Homestart'. Nevertheless, in any such facility, the co-ordinator, project staff and other group members have a role to play in ensuring that new attenders are introduced to the group, welcomed to it, and given the time, and encouragement, to develop at their own pace, and gain in confidence, in order that they may participate fully.

Why do women use the mother and toddler group?

The women who were interviewed revealed several reasons for using the mother and toddler group in 123 House. These were both child- and self-oriented. (The former will be examined in the following chapter). The most outstanding need was for **companionship**. This need has to be seen in terms of how the women perceived their way of life, based primarily in the home. For them, such a lifestyle was a particularly isolating and isolated one. These women almost unanimously made reference to being *"stuck in the house"*, and they indicated the monotony and boredom which this produced: *"Tied to the same old routine of cleaning every day"; "Just sitting in the house, bored to tears doing nothing"; "Bored and fed up looking at the four walls of the house"*. Feelings of boredom were exacerbated by the fact that most of the women had little social contact with anyone outside the home: *"I was stuck in the house and didn't see people - the neighbours don't seem to bother much"; "Stuck in the house, I forgot how to talk to other adults"*. One woman described how, once she had completed her housework, she would *"sit, just waiting and hoping someone would call at the door, so that I could get a bit of a chat"*. Two others said that they spent each day aimlessly walking around town with their young children, and another mentioned that she was *"just jumping on a bus and going to my mum's, or sitting in the house"*.

Not surprisingly then, from the group, women wanted *"company and enjoyment"; "to be able to talk to people other than just children - adult conversation"; "to be sitting in a group, rather than sitting alone with the child"; "other adults to talk to"*. They expressed a desire to *"make friends, get to know people in the area", "to get among people"*, as well as a need to *"simply get out of the house"*. The women also indicated the importance of a **break from the children**: *"a bit of peace and quiet from the kids for a while"*. This break was important, because, as one woman pointed out, without a garden, her child could not play outside without constantly being supervised, and consequently, the respondant got little time for herself. The need **to alleviate boredom** was also acknowledged - some mentioned the desire to *"break up the week"*, and *"give yourself something to look forward to"*.

Only four mothers initially made specific reference to the need for some form of **'self development'** through the mother and toddler group. One said she wanted to develop her writing ideas, and get inspiration from other women, as well as *"time for myself"*. This idea was reiterated by another who wanted *"something for myself as an individual, rather than as part of a family....I'm going out and doing things, not for myself, but for my husband and family"*. A third felt that she wanted to *"get things for myself, to bring me out of myself and get more confidence"*. A fourth respondant felt that she wanted to *"attend some kind of informal class, to learn something new"*.

What value has the group?

Having joined, did the women find that the mother and toddler group fulfilled their needs? In fact, while the women had indicated that their primary concern was with companionship, the interviews revealed that they had benefitted from the project in many different respects. In theory, the group seems to operate at three levels - **social**, **educational** and **personal**. In reality, however, the distinctions between these become blurred, and the women indicated that attendance had affected them in all three ways. As one woman said, the group *"lived up to and far beyond my expectations of it"*.

In terms of the social benefits, all of the women felt that they had gained from the group, and although only a few saw other attenders outside on a social basis (largely as a result of domestic commitments), the friendships formed within the House were important in reducing isolation. By coming to the project, the women had extended their social networks: *"Before I came to the group, I didn't know any of my neighbours - now I know lots of people in the district"; "Now I'm talking to plenty of people - going to the shop takes an hour, I meet so many I know!"*

Nineteen of the women who were interviewed had attended some of the various courses which had been held in the mother and toddler group, and they indicated the positive value of these. Comments about the welfare rights course, for example, included that it was *"very useful"* and provided *"practical information"*; one woman pointed out that although she was not receiving any benefits, it was important to know about them *"just in case"*. Similarly, the women's health course was appreciated: *"I learnt things I didn't know before"*. One woman said that the information given at this course had corrected her misconceptions about, for example, cancer, and, through providing the opportunity to discuss things like the menopause, had allowed the women to express their fears and *"talk about how you feel"*. Another class which proved popular was knitting and crafts; many of the women who had attended this had completed garments, either for themselves or their families; some had also made curtains and patchwork quilts. Several made reference to the fact that they had *"tried before and failed"*, but had now made a few things. Some said they had learnt new skills and tried out things *"which I thought I couldn't do"*. There was a sense of satisfaction at having created something which they could *"show off"*.

The assertiveness class which seven of the women attended was considered particularly useful, especially because many of the skills learnt through the course were applicable within a broader context. One mentioned that she would now take unsatisfactory goods back to a shop, whereas before, she would have asked her mother or someone else to do this for her. Another said that she was no longer reluctant to send back a poor meal in a restaurant, for example. She commented that it was *"disgusting, sickening"* to think how shy she had been before this course. Another woman indicated that the course helped her to realise that she wasn't alone in her shyness; this realisation, and the course content, helped her to *"stand up for myself"*.

The creative writing class was attended by six of the interviewees. This proved another popular course, and one of its more visible outcomes was the publication of a book containing the women's work. One described the effects of this as being *"a great feeling, to have your work and your name in print - a bit of fame!....I was so proud of it!"*. Another indicated that her poetry was an important means of expression - rather than keeping all her feelings hidden, she was now able, through writing, to express *"anger against my husband, our political differences and things like that"*. Two of the women said that they would not have attempted anything like this before - *"I just wasn't interested at school, and wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for the class"*.

Both the social and educational benefits of the group then had repercussions at a personal level for the women, particularly in terms of increased confidence: *"I've more confidence now through talking to people"; "More outgoing - able to mix more easily. The group makes quiet people break out of themselves"; "Confidence in talking to other people"; "I've opened up more....more confident"; "I now feel like I can join in, rather than just listen"; "Before, I didn't really bother with people - now, I'll talk to them"; "I don't hold back in conversation like I did before"*. This increased confidence was sometimes expressed through a change in appearance; one woman said she was now *"thinking about clothes and appearance, whereas I didn't before....I'm now beginning to feel good about myself"*. Another two said that coming to the group meant that they now had *"something to look forward to - something to get dressed up for"*. It is worth pointing out that several of these women went on to sit on the management committee in 123 House, taking on positions of public responsibility which they might not otherwise have done; this in turn provided them with more new experiences, and further increased their confidence.

The women felt that the changes in themselves had also produced changes in their relationships with others, particularly with their children; *"I don't shout at them as much now - coming to the 123 gives me a chance to unwind and get a break from them"; "I'm*

easier going with the kids now - because I get out of the house for a while I think I can go back and appreciate it more - I'm much more relaxed". A minder made the comment that *"by getting away from him (the child), I can enjoy the time that I'm with him"*. These comments seem to reiterate the point that time and space for mothers can enhance the parent/child relationship.

What contributed to the success of the group?

This chapter has already described the importance of, for example, creating a balanced programme of activities within the mother and toddler group, but the women also highlighted other features which they felt contributed to success. One of the most overwhelming points made concerned the fact that the general organisation of the group was beneficial to the women themselves. The separation of children from mothers and minders ensured that the women got a chance to relax, and enjoy time for themselves. This theme was emphasised by those who had attended other mother and toddler groups. They felt that these had been largely child-oriented; mothers and children were together, and the emphasis was on entertaining the toddlers through group singing and games. Moreover, a change of staff at one previously popular group meant that there were *"rotas for making the tea, separate biscuits for the kids and mothers and things like that"*. The women complained, *"You couldn't smoke or relax"; "It was really only for the children....too strict for mothers - it didn't really cater for their needs"; "It was no laugh for mothers"*. The 'drop-in' nature of the group in 123, and the relative lack of rules and regulations, added to the women's feeling that the House was somewhere they could go to relax and enjoy themselves.

This sense of informality also seemed an important factor in the success of the various courses which had been organised. As one mother suggested, *"I wanted to learn things, but not in a formal way - I didn't want to sit exams or anything like that - I didn't want courses where I was sitting writing, but informal classes or discussions on things"*. For women who have not had any connection with the formal education system for some time, and who have perhaps had fairly negative experiences at school, the classes run by the mother and toddler group provided the chance to *"use my brain"* without the pressures of formal learning. The appreciation of this informality was revealed in comments such as, *"I can come to the class on a Friday and just sit there if I want to, rather than do anything"*, and, *"You're under no obligation to do anything if you don't want to"*.

The overall style of teaching/learning was vital here. Throughout all of the courses, the emphasis was on mutual support and sharing in the learning process; the women were encouraged to express their views, and share their experiences with one another. This process was perhaps made easier by the fact that several of the classes, (crafts, creative writing and health), were taken by women who actually attended the group. One of these course tutors suggested that the women were more at ease in a situation where they knew the tutor personally; this familiarity made it easier to approach her with problems and requests for help. Similarly, for the tutor of the creative writing course, the class became a forum for an exchange of ideas, rather than a one-sided teacher/student situation. She felt that she had gained inspiration from the women, as well as providing them with help with their writing. Within the class too, women were giving each other assistance, with rhyming, constructive criticism and so on; learning became a reciprocal, shared process.

It was also important that the sessions were shaped by what the women themselves wanted. There is sometimes an argument that courses such as needlecrafts tend to reinforce women's traditional role, but in fact, in 123, the mothers had requested this type of class, and their comments clearly indicate that it was useful in providing them with a great sense of achievement, and developing their self-esteem. It seems essential that courses should start out from women's own expressed needs, helping them to develop their confidence in gradual stages, rather than plunging them into unfamiliar topics. A number of the the women using the mother and toddler group in 123 House later moved into the formal educational system, taking up courses such as English, at night-school. The sessions themselves moved at a pace dictated by the women, without adhering to any rigid format. Thus, a group discussion with a health visitor, which initially started out about headlice, moved on to a talk about smoking and women's health, with the mothers giving direction to the session, and guiding it towards subjects which interested and concerned them.

More generally, the women felt that the mother and toddler group provided an environment in which they could help and support one another in a variety of ways. At a practical level, they cited examples of collecting money for someone who was being evicted or having a baby, visits to mothers who were in hospital and childminding for each other. Help was particularly shared with regards to childcare - for example, advice was passed on about how to cope with crying, toilet training and feeding. One first-time mother described how the women had been extremely helpful to her; she felt she lacked confidence in her ability as a mother: *"I was faced with this tiny wee thing, and I felt so responsible - I didn't know what to do"*. The mothers in 123 helped through sharing their

experiences of child-rearing, and providing ideas for her to adopt.

Emotional support was particularly valuable. Women mentioned that others had supported them through various crises in their lives - bereavement, miscarriage, menopause, post-natal depression. In this respect, the most important feature of the group was that it provided an opportunity to talk about the problem: *"Through talking, you realise that perhaps you're not as badly off as you thought you were"; "You realise you're not the only one with problems"*. The chance to share experiences was useful: *"You hear about different things - people's different experiences"; "It helped by talking with other mothers and hearing that they'd gone through the same thing - it was good to know I wasn't alone"; "If you have a problem, everyone talks about it and helps get it sorted out"*. Several women mentioned the fact that they had been attending their doctor for treatment for depression, but resented the fact that G.P.'s simply prescribed tranquilisers or anti-depressants, which did nothing to tackle the isolation and loneliness which was at the root of their problem. As one mother said, *"all the tablets in the world wouldn't have helped the loneliness and depression I had. What I needed was company and a good laugh"*.

The co-ordinator of 123 House had a vital, and much-appreciated, role in this whole area of support. Through the development of open and friendly relationships with the women who used the group, she was trusted by them, and individuals often turned to her for emotional support during particular crises. At the same time, she was able to act as a resource person, using her own network of contacts to refer mothers to agencies offering specialist help - Women's Aid, advice centres and lawyers, for example. In this way, she provided a form of easily-approachable, professional help, backing up and complementing the support which the women gave to one another.

A word must also be said about the much broader role of the project worker who is involved with a mother and toddler group. It has already been pointed out that the co-ordinator in 123 initially stressed that it was important that the mothers should feel that the group belonged to them, and, to an extent, this did happen, with the women becoming more independent, and less reliant on her to help shape the group. At the same time, however, such a group may continue to require some level of support - encouragement, and practical help - to enable users to become more involved in organising for themselves, and take advantage of the wide range of facilities which are available outside the project - shopping and leisure centres, for example. The project worker also has an important role to play in making the women aware of organisations which might be useful to them - Well Woman Centres, Gingerbread, and so on - and promoting contact with other groups, through, for instance, 'Women's Information Days'. She can also help to persuade the women using the mother and toddler group of their importance in running it, and encourage them to organise and participate in activities, such as fundraising, which are vital to its upkeep.

THE CRECHE

As the previous chapter revealed, the provision of a separate creche is a vital factor in the overall success of the mother and toddler group in 123 House. The facility allows women the security of knowing that their children are being safely cared for in another part of the building, and gives the mothers a chance to pursue other interests outside the home. But the creche is also an important entity itself, with a useful role to play in relation to the young children who attend.

In general, there is a lack of information about creche facilities - how they operate, or what goes on within them. The expectation that very young children will be looked after almost solely by their mothers, within the home, means that the care of the under-threes in a group setting has received little research attention. This chapter attempts to address this problem, by providing a description of the creche in 123 House, looking at it from the perspective of staff, parents and children, and drawing attention to some of the broad issues which can arise in the provision of such a facility.

The creche in 123 House

Since the creche operates as an integral part of the mother and toddler group in 123, it too is open between 10am and 12pm, for the use of children whose mothers or minders come to the project. It is based in a medium-sized room on the middle floor of the House, and has access to a children's toilet, washing-up facilities and a large store room, which sometimes can be used as space for an additional activity for a very small number of toddlers. The creche is equipped with a range of games and toys - shape-sorters, jigsaw puzzles, 'Lego', stickle bricks, toy 'garage' and 'shops', miniature 'tea-sets' and 'telephones', and manipulative toys for younger children. On occasion, space permitting, larger toys are introduced - a wooden 'Wendy House', slide or tricycles. This equipment has been gathered together from a variety of sources - some has been donated to the group; a few items are 'borrowed' from the playgroup in the House, and others have been purchased, using grants from, for example, 'Telethon' and, 'Children in Need'. Women using the facility have made a contribution through various fundraising events - for example, a sponsored mother and toddler run/walk around a local park, which succeeded in raising over £400, and a number of jumble and cake sales. The room in which the creche is located is also used on a daily basis by the project's Afterschool Club, and so, all toys and equipment must be stored after each morning session.

The employment of staff plays a critical role in the ability of 123 House to provide its creche facility, and ensures that women using the mother and toddler group do have time for themselves. Initially, when the group first started, a volunteer agreed to help in the creche, while a young person, employed under the 'Younghelp' scheme was also engaged to work there. In January 1987, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, as part of its large-scale funding of the House, provided salaries for a couple of creche staff. The result is that the facility now employs two workers, and a 'Younghelp' trainee.

Users

The number of children using the creche in 123 House is obviously dependent on the number of women attending the mother and toddler group. The facility has been used by up to 60 children each week, and has an average daily attendance of around ten youngsters. However, these figures disguise the fact that, on occasion, as many as 33 children have attended on one day, and there have sometimes been up to 20 toddlers there. One of the difficulties in organising the creche concerns the fact that attendance rates can be unpredictable, and are affected by various factors, including the weather, school holidays, when mothers remain at home to look after older children or bring them along, or the introduction of a particularly popular class for the women. Similarly, the flexible nature of the group, which means that users can drop in at any time between 10 and 12 ensures that, even during each daily session, the number of children in the room fluctuates.

Added to the difficulty of constantly changing attendance rates is the fact that, within the creche, the children themselves do not form a homogeneous group. As in any similar facility, they vary in age, from the very young - only a few months old - to older children, almost ready for nursery school. This means a wide range of ability amongst the toddlers; they are all at differing stages of development - physically, socially and mentally. Such variability places heavy demands on workers, in terms of consideration of all the children's needs. Staff are faced with the struggle of organising and conducting a programme which takes account of, and caters for, this diversity.

Reasons for using the creche

The previous chapter has already described women's own needs in using the mother and toddler group, but the mothers also outlined a series of reasons for attendance which were related specifically to their children. The most frequently-mentioned of these was to provide **company** for the toddlers. It seemed that childcare responsibilities not only confined women to the home and contributed to isolation; children also suffered. The women felt that the toddlers spent most of their lives in close proximity to their families, particularly their mothers, and so, had few opportunities to mix with other children or adults. They pointed out, *"I wanted to take the child out of the house - he's stuck inside with me all the time"; "The child needed company - to get to play with others"; "I wanted him to mix - there's nobody nearby for him to mix with"; "The child is on her own and gets lonely".*

It was felt that mixing with others in the creche would have many important benefits for the children. Women hoped that the group would encourage *"independence and sharing"*. For example, one mother suggested that her child had little freedom before attending the creche, since there was nowhere for him to play without supervision from her. It was recognised therefore that, just as mothers needed a break from their children, so too did infants require some **time to themselves**: *"Young children are very dependent on their mothers - a group like this allows them to be weaned off, and puts a bit of distance between the mother and child - it gives them both a break"*. Through this independence, it was expected that children would **increase in confidence**: *"I wanted to bring him out of his shell"*. Mothers suggested too that the group would provide greater **stimulation** for their children, through the provision of a wide range of toys and activities to which they might not otherwise have had access. A few women were looking further ahead, and hoping that the experience of the creche would benefit their children in terms of **settling into nursery school or playgroup**.

The staff in 123 House shared this perception of the creche as primarily somewhere where children could learn *"to mix with others"*. Through this mixing, the workers felt that the group should *"help children to be less selfish....to learn to share toys"*, and that the experience of being with other children would help to *"bring out their personality....help them not to be so shy"*. In achieving these goals, workers identified their own particular role - one which involved facilitating the mixing of children, but which also included a contribution to the development of their cognitive and language skills. They described their work as *"helping the children to get together as a group....then to teach them as a group. Children learn through watching other children and adults - the workers demonstrate how to do things....some kids just watch, then eventually they join in - workers teach to groups, and this helps to build confidence"*. An important aspect of this work was that the creche provided an opportunity for children to *"learn to play"*; workers recognised that toddlers may not necessarily have instructional toys at home, and this meant that *"some kids simply don't know what it is to play"*.

The child in the creche

What goes on in the creche? What do the children do there? To find out a little more about the creche in 123 House, from the child's perspective, an observational technique, the 'target child method', was used. This method, (which is more fully described by Sylva, Roy and Painter, in their book, 'Childwatching at Playgroup and Nursery School' (1980)), involves systematically observing, for 10 minutes at a time, everything that a particular child does, then coding behaviour according to type of play, speech and language, and social interaction - that is, whether he/she played alone, in a pair or in a group, and what contact was made with adults. In 123, altogether 25 children (13 boys and 12 girls), of a variety of ages (from around one year to three years old), who regularly attended the creche were observed on two separate days. Given that among both staff and mothers involved with the creche, the importance of social development had been stressed, the observation placed particular emphasis on 'interaction' - the degree of 'mixing' among the children, their contacts with workers, and, in particular, the opportunities which the overall structure and organisation of the creche provided for such interaction.

Observation found that children's time in the creche was spent fairly evenly distributed between interaction and non-interaction with others (49% and 51% of observations respectively). However, it seemed that there was a marked tendency for the youngest children to spend a large proportion of their time - sometimes up to 80% - without any kind of social contact. Where contact did take place, children spent more time with other children than with adults, and most commonly, contact with others was on a one-to-one basis, playing in pairs, rather than in a group.

The children were involved in a range of activities in the creche, some of which seemed more conducive to the promotion of 'mixing' than others. **'Non-playful activity'** (which includes all interaction, verbal or physical (but definitely not play), such as borrowing, aggressive or affectionate behaviour) was the most common of these activities, accounting for 20% of all observations, and obviously, by definition, involved the greatest levels of interaction. A high proportion (22%) of these observations concerned **object-control**; that is, disagreement over possession of particular toys - the toy 'telephone' was an especially valued object - and this seemed the most common source of dispute in the creche. It was usually quickly resolved, either through one child gaining control of the toy in question, or attention being diverted to some other activity, or intervention by a staff member with requests to *"Share - there's plenty of toys for everyone"*. The incidence of **'giving'** behaviour in the creche seemed to indicate that children were indeed learning to share with others. For example, a child was watching a boy who had been crying; she picked up a toy 'motorbike' and took it over to him, saying, *"I'll let you play with that later, will I?"*.

Within this category of 'non-playful activity', **conversation** was also common. Where conversation took place with adults, it was usually initiated by the children themselves, and often involved descriptions of what they had been doing, or requests for information about other children. Similarly, conversations between children also demonstrated natural curiosity: *"What do you call you? Are you a wee girl?"*. *"No"*. *"Are you a a big girl then?"*. Such interest in others was reflected in long periods of close inspection of other children in the creche - crouching down and peering into their faces, for example - and was often accompanied by **affectionate gestures**. In fact, informal observations indicated that such affection was generally common in the creche; there were a high number of instances of children standing with their arms around one another, or kissing.

Informal games, which accounted for about 9% of all activity, also seemed to encourage mixing. Just over half of the observations of such games found children involved in contact with others. The games were initiated by the children themselves, and were usually carried out within a small group; they were often quite lengthy, and involved turn-taking. For example, four children were seated at a table, drinking juice; teddy bears were lined up on the table in front of them. One child, laughing, shouted, *"Don't you dare!"* at the teddies, and the others imitated him, taking turns to repeat the phrase. This game lasted for five minutes, and it reveals how children in the creche were learning to co-operate and negotiate an activity together.

Art was also associated with high levels of mixing, but unfortunately accounted for only 2% of all activities observed in the creche. Drawing and painting often occurred within a small group at the easel, and generally attracted other children towards it. While it was usually organised by an adult (through putting paper on the easel, bringing out crayons and so on), after the worker had moved on to something else, it became self-sustaining, and lasted for fairly long periods of time. Social contact involved discussion of what was being drawn, and the activity also encouraged swapping crayons and pencils, and sharing paper. For instance, two little girls were drawing on a piece of paper, using only two or three crayons; one turned to the other and said, *"Give me the orange one and you have the other one"*.

'Pretend' play in the creche seemed to be satisfying for the children, whether or not others were involved. The most commonly used 'pretend' toys were the 'telephone' and 'tea-set', while the doll and crib, when available, were also used extensively by boys and girls. These all tended to involve periods of solitary play, during which the child talked to him or herself, and then brief exchanges with other children or adults. The 'telephone', for example, was often carried to others in the creche, accompanied by comments such as, *"That's for you....that's my mummy on the phone"*, with follow-up conversations, and there were numerous offers of *"a wee cup of tea"*, served from the 'tea-set', to other children, workers, parents and researcher alike! Informal observation in the creche also revealed that 'pretend' play had great potential for encouraging the children to mix; the 'Wendy House', in particular, became a focus of attention for most children, and encouraged a high degree of conversation and interactive play.

In terms of activities least associated with any kind of social contact, the category of **'watching'** found children mainly on their own. It was worrying that this was the second most common activity in the creche, accounting for 15% of all observations. It was most usual among the very youngest children, some of whom spent over a third of their time watching others. Obviously, to some extent, 'watching' may be seen as a positive activity, representing an opportunity for learning of some nature - for example, where it involved

watching others, perhaps with the intention of joining in; among the children, such watching almost always preceded participation in a group activity. Among younger children, it was sometimes indicative of an active interest in others - watching children arrive at the creche with their mothers, for instance. However, in other cases, the activity could be viewed as more negative, when the child was neither waiting to participate, nor displaying any particular interest in what was going on, but simply gazing around.

Particular pieces of **equipment** in the creche also seemed more beneficial than others, in terms of encouraging the children to 'mix'. It was found that the use of miniature objects, such as toy 'cars', the toy 'shop' and the 'garage', and of structured materials, like jig-saws and shape-sorters, were least likely to produce any kind of social contact; between 60% and 70% of observations of children using such equipment involved solitary play. At a more intermediate level, observations of activity involving small constructional materials, such as 'Lego', found that around 40% of time was spent mixing with others, usually within a group, and involving an adult, who had an educational role, providing information about shapes and colours, and encouraging the children to expand their imaginations about what they had made. Children were seen describing their creations, and making up stories about them: *"That's my mummy, and that's my daddy, and that's ME!"* (small boy, pointing to figures in a 'Lego' 'house').

Of course, it would be wrong to simply regard all creche activity in terms of its relationship with 'mixing'. The work there is also intended to have an **instructional, educational value**. Consequently, it seemed that, while the use of structured materials and small-scale constructional toys were less conducive to social activity, they did seem more likely to contribute to children's cognitive development, through challenging their thoughts, ideas and imaginations. This challenge was often seen through the degree of concentration with which the toddlers played with particular toys; for example, one of the younger children was observed working with a wooden jig-saw puzzle, carefully feeling the shape of each piece with his finger, before setting it into the appropriate place. However, the use, by such young children, of miniature toys, such as the 'garage' or 'shop' seemed to provide little challenge to compensate for their lack of potential for social development; toddlers tended to play with these items of equipment only briefly, and with little concentration or imagination.

Structure of the creche

There were some features concerning the overall structure of the creche which had an effect on activity within the group, and the degree of 'mixing' which took place. The **role of staff** was important. Despite the fact that workers viewed their role, in theory, as working with children in groups, in practice, this was not always feasible, given the relatively large number of toddlers using the facility. It was also important that, on one day each week, the 'Younghelp' worker attended a course, with the result that the facility was sometimes staffed by only two workers. While even this may seem something of a luxury to other mother and toddler groups, it is clear that a lack of staff does have an impact on the type of work which can be carried out in a facility catering for very young children. In such a situation, the workers' role inevitably becomes primarily managerial and supervisory, concerned largely with the tasks which enable the creche to run smoothly and simply making sure that the children are safe. This reduces the time which can be spent on other areas of work, such as playing with, and talking to, the toddlers, and encouraging their educational development, and means that children are often left to their own devices, spending a large proportion of their time alone or with other children, rather than adults.

The daily **organisation** within the creche also has an effect. In 123, at the time when the research was being carried out, the creche operated on a 'free play' principle. At the beginning of each session, staff randomly set some toys on the floor, and distributed others to one or two tables in the room (for example, 'the puzzle table' or 'the 'Lego' table'). The children were able to move freely about the room, from one activity to another, with little structure to their time or play. While this arrangement seemed acceptable for the older children, and provided an opportunity for them to mix with others, it was less so for the youngest ones, who spent time aimlessly wandering around the room alone, and often failed to get a chance to play with toys which were suitable for their age group. Naturally, their very young ages, and consequent lack of social skills, were an important factor here, but nevertheless, it seemed that the informal structure meant that the youngest attenders were sometimes overlooked.

Another relevant factor concerned the **location of equipment**. Those toys which were in some fixed position, such as on a table, seemed more likely to attract sustained play, with a higher level of social contact. A 'circle effect' seemed to operate here, in that fixed-position activities attracted greater attention from children and adults alike, and, in turn, the presence of both attracted even more interest. The number of children at such activities encouraged high levels of behaviour such as conversation and sharing, while the worker contributed to the development of awareness of colours and shapes, for example. It was not surprising then that the use of things like stuctured materials rated highly in terms of both social and cognitive benefits. On the other hand, the miniature toys, which seemed least valuable in social or other developmental terms were scattered on the floor, and consequently, were played with only briefly by individual children, and no 'social centre' seemed to develop. The **variety of equipment** was obviously important too. In 123 House, for instance, a shortage of art materials ensured that drawing and painting, despite their obvious value, could only be provided on a limited scale.

Following the initial period of research, the creche in 123 received a number of small one-off grants from various sources, such as the BBC's 'Children In Need' Appeal, and the D.H.S.S.' 'Small Grants Initiative Scheme'. The availability of extra funds enabled workers to look at ways of improving the structure of the facility. New equipment was purchased, including easels and materials for art work, toy prams, puzzles and musical equipment, thereby increasing the range of activities available to the children. In recognition too of the difficulties, for both children and staff, of the totally 'free play' nature of the group, the creche workers developed a rota of weekly activities, with a particular focus of play for each day - art, music or dressing up, for example. A regular 'break-time' was established, to provide some structure in terms of time. This was also in accordance with a concern expressed by the mothers that the older children should have the chance to participate in more structured activities, similar to those already organised in the playgroup in 123 House. The purchase of basic equipment, such as tables and chairs specially tailored for this age group, meant that some activities could be based at fairly fixed positions in the room, and consequently, rather than children moving around, sometimes rather aimlessly, from toy to toy, the creche developed its own 'social centre', at which the toddlers congregated and played together. From the staff perspective, of course, these new arrangements rendered the creche more manageable, and provided more time to devote to actually working with children. It was particularly important that the youngest users could now be cared for together within a small group, and had access to age-related toys; this seemed to reduce their isolation within the creche. Workers noted that the children were being stimulated by the new and wider range of equipment and activities available to them, and revealed more concentration and greater sociability.

However, it has to be said that this format is not necessarily a prescription for an 'ideal' creche. In any such facility, it is important to remember that the group is dynamic, and will change, in terms of composition, over time. While the observational research was being conducted in 123, the majority of children were around two or three years old, and therefore, a more organised structure seemed appropriate. As time passed, these children moved on to school, and women in the mother and toddler group were bringing their second or third, much younger, children to the creche, with the result that the facility then contained a higher proportion of very young children, including infants. These children require special attention - ideally, they should receive one-to-one care, and the maximum adult:child ratio for this age group is 1:2. This clearly places extra demands on staff, with the result that they have less time to spend on providing structured activities for the older children. At the same time, the equipment in the creche which has been purchased for an older age range becomes inappropriate to the requirements of babies. But a mixture of very young children and more mobile toddlers also creates a very real anxiety among mothers about the safety of their youngsters.

There is no easy solution to this problem. Ideally, the two sets of children would be cared for in separate groups, where their particular needs could be met. The researcher visited another community group in Belfast which has been successful in establishing such an arrangement. Toddlers have the use of a

well-equipped room in one part of the building, while the very youngest children are accomodated in a separate room. This is equipped with baby-chairs, playpens, soft toys and other equipment suitable for babies, and is staffed by several workers, assisted, when necessary, by mothers who are using the facility. For the vast majority of mother and toddler groups, this is unrealistic; few would have the staff or premises to make such provision, but, nevertheless, this type of project demonstrates the way in which a group can potentially develop to cater for the needs of its users.

An alternative solution, of course, is to call upon the women using the mother and toddler group to provide volunteer help in the creche when necessary. For many projects, and particularly those who are just starting out, this is generally the primary means of providing any kind of separate facility for toddlers. In others, where staff are available, as in 123 House, then mothers can be a valuable source of assistance to workers. This, however, is not always without problems. In 123, some mothers do spend time in the creche, playing with the children there, or simply watching, but, in fact, it has been quite difficult to establish any kind of regular and consistent system of help.

Staff-parent communication can be an issue here, with workers sometimes reluctant to ask the mothers for help when it is needed. In part, this may be due to a tension between the basic aim of providing mothers with a break from childcare responsibilities, and asking women to sacrifice some of their free time to help provide a service for groups of children. At the same time, the whole notion of parental involvement in a service-providing facility is one which is sometimes unfamiliar to both workers and parents. While the ethos of such involvement is often linked in with the playgroup movement, more generally, staff concerned with preschool childcare are not necessarily given adequate practical training in working along with parents, and may not be sure how to best utilise the potential of mothers to help in the creche. Users too are not always aware of the importance of their own role in relation to such a facility, and can sometimes feel that they do not wish to intrude on the work of paid workers.

Within any such project concerned with the welfare and care of children, it is clearly important to devise effective means of parent-staff communication, with workers encouraged to request help when it is needed, and women asked to actually participate in the running of the creche. But good relationships are also important in providing parents and staff with an opportunity to discuss individual children, their likes and dislikes, their specific needs, and their progress both at home and in the creche, as well as any particular problems. Such communication gives mothers a chance to get to know, and trust, the people with whom they are leaving their young children, while simultaneously providing staff with useful information which can help them in their daily work.

The more general position of staff who work with the under-threes must be mentioned. The idea that this age group will be cared for individually by their mothers means that training programmes for pre-school workers tend to emphasise the acquisition of skills necessary for dealing with three to five year olds, rather than younger children. But the various demands of this age group, in face of inadequate training for work with them, and coupled with limited resources (such as space) mean that staff can become frustrated with their task. They have a particular need for support in their role, from other project workers and external organisations concerned with childcare. It is also important that creche staff set time aside for the planning and development of programmes within the group, which are stimulating, not only for the children, but for the workers themselves to carry out.

Benefits of the creche

Despite some of the difficulties of effectively organising a creche, the women in 123 House agreed that their children had benefitted, in a variety of ways, from using the facility. In particular, the toddlers seemed less dependent, especially on their mothers: *"Before, he was very clingy and attached to me - he's not so bad now"; "He's more outgoing now and mixes better"*. Two mothers indicated that this independence had benefits for themselves, in terms of providing greater personal freedom: *"I can leave him in the creche in town now while I go shopping"; "He'll stay in another creche while I'm shopping"*.

The women felt the creche had been instrumental in encouraging their children to share with others: *"He's had to learn to wait a turn and share"; "She can now share things and play with other kids without getting jealous"; "There's a bit more give and take with other*

kids". Children had been helped to *"recognise the needs of others"*, and consequently, they were able to play more co-operatively, both within the group itself, and at home with brothers and sisters. Indeed, several mothers felt that the creche had been important in *"teaching"* their children *"how to play"*, in terms of sharing, and of concentration on games and puzzles: *"The child is playing more - with building blocks and things like that"*. Of course, in this, they appreciated the fact that the children using the creche had the opportunity to play with a wide range of toys: *"In the group, the child is learning new and different things - there's more variety here than there is at home"*.

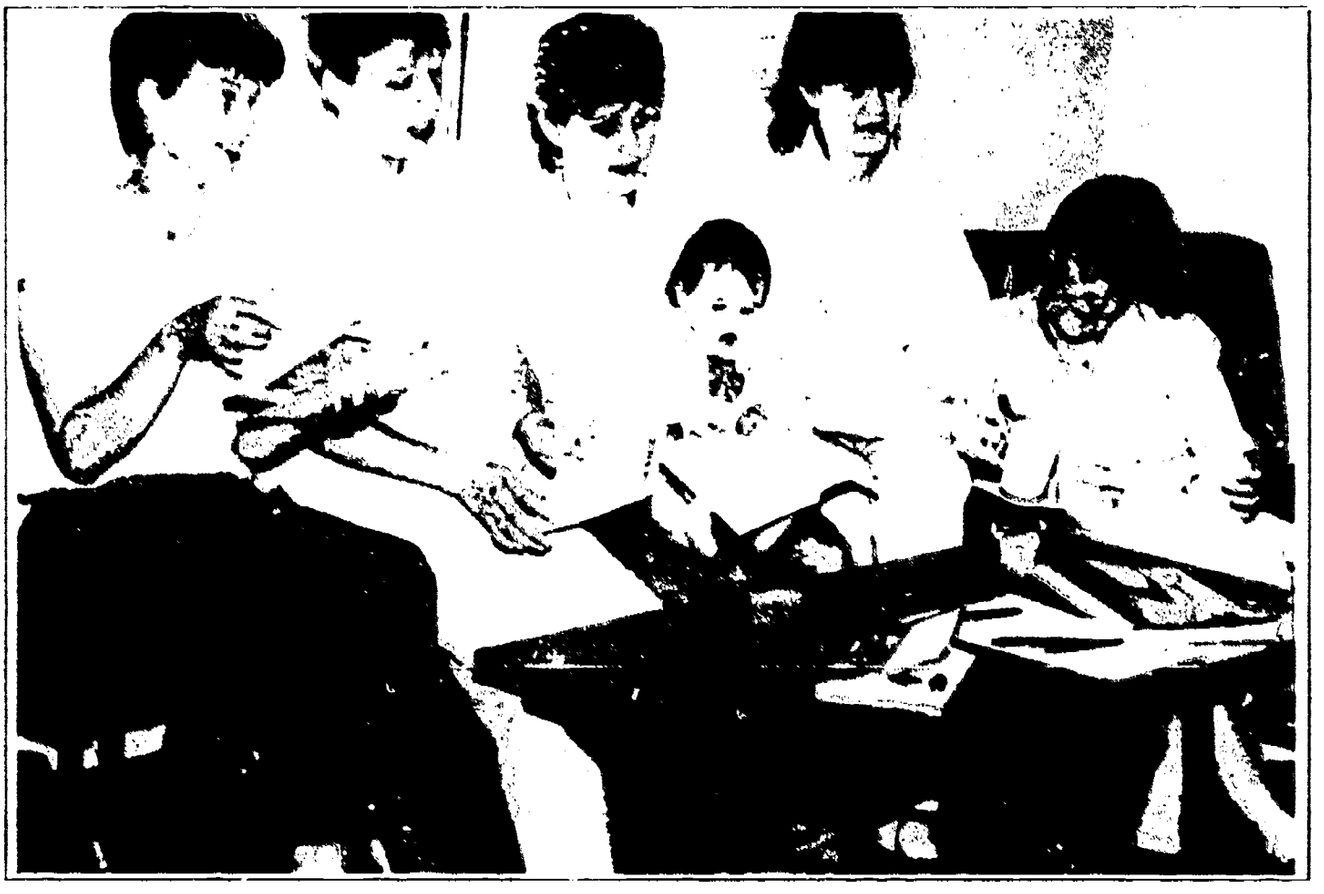
Some mothers also suggested that their children's speech had improved, as a result of both increased contact with others, and through providing toddlers with experiences which they could then talk about: *"The child was not talking very well - now she can talk much better"; "She can now put a good sentence together, and express herself more"; "She gets taken to the park by the workers, and then she comes home and tells me and her daddy all about it"*.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This report has outlined the development and operation of the mother and toddler group in 123 House, and has demonstrated the value of such a facility for the parents and children who use it. For women who bear most of the responsibility for childcare, and who subsequently have little access to social activity outside the home, the group has provided a venue for meeting other mothers with similar concerns, thereby creating an opportunity for companionship, and facilitating the development of practically and emotionally supportive relationships. The group gives these women both time and space to consider their needs as individuals, and develop a sense of their own worth. Various classes held within the project have opened up new interests, and encouraged the development of personal skills and abilities, as well as a growth in confidence.

The provision of a creche has played a vital role in this, by giving women some freedom from their children, even temporarily. At the same time, the creche has its own inherent value for the children who attend. These toddlers have benefitted from the opportunity to mix with other children and adults, as well as gaining access to a wider range of toys and activities than usual. As a result, the children have been helped to gain confidence, learn to play and develop their speech.

Of course, in saying this, it is remembered that the mother and toddler group in 123 House experienced the relative 'luxury' of having two paid staff, and a 'Younghelp' worker; permanent, if limited, premises; and some funds for the purchase of equipment. Many other groups are not so fortunate, and are forced to exist using whatever few resources they can muster. At the same time, however, the research in 123, while not providing any 'blueprint', demonstrates the way in which projects can potentially develop, and highlights some issues which will inevitably be applicable in other settings.



The main points concerning the overall organisation of the mother and toddler group can be summarised as follows:

• The term 'mother and toddler group' should not be taken too literally; such a group can cater for women from a wide range of family circumstances, and with a variety of experiences.

• It is necessary to be aware of the problems of 'closing' and cliquishness within the group, particularly among long-standing members, and try to ensure, as far as possible that everyone is made to feel welcome. This might be done through, for example, special sessions or 'open days' for 'newcomers', which provide a chance to meet with staff and other users.

• The provision of some kind of creche facility is vital in ensuring that women with children have the opportunity to pursue their own interests.

• The women themselves should be encouraged to shape the group, and to talk about what they want and expect from it. It must be remembered that it may take time for the users to reach a stage when they feel sufficiently confident to express their needs, but it is important that the group is allowed to develop at its own pace.

• In terms of the organisation of the group, it is important to strike a balance, by recognising the value, to women, of 'free time' to sit, talk and relax, as well as the usefulness of courses, sessions by speakers such as health visitors, and other activities.

• An informal environment and atmosphere is essential in ensuring that the women using the group can relax.

• Courses should be suited to the demands and needs of the women. The style of tutoring is important in such classes; informality is valuable in ensuring that adult education within the mother and toddler group is non-threatening and non-pressuring, and encourages the women to help and support one another in learning.

• The project worker who is involved with the mother and toddler group has a vital role, in encouraging and supporting the group as a whole, as well as enabling the women to plug into the wider network of groups and agencies catering for their needs. She/he may also have a role in providing professional help and advice, thereby complementing the support which the women give to each other.

There are also some important points concerning the provision of a creche which are worth bearing in mind:

• Children using a creche are not a homogeneous group, but vary in age and ability, and therefore, have a very wide range of needs to be catered for. It is essential to pay close attention to the overall organisation of the facility and its programme of activities, in order to take account of this variability.

• The creche is a fairly dynamic facility; its composition, and consequently the needs of its users, change over time. Staff must be aware of such changes, and adapt the structure of the creche accordingly.

• Careful consideration must be given to the purchase of equipment for the creche, to ensure that children's needs are met. Items such as tables and chairs are useful in creating a 'social centre' at which older children can congregate and play, and equipment such as 'Lego', puzzles, art materials and pretend toys are important for promoting development in a range of skills. It is also essential to include items of equipment, such as baby-chairs, and toys, which are specifically designed for the very youngest creche attenders.

• The youngest children also have particular needs for intensive care, and these must be recognised and catered for. Where possible, there is great value in having a room and carers, (either staff or mothers), assigned especially to the care of these children.

• Most projects face the difficulty of working with limited resources, particularly in terms of numbers of workers. It is important to attempt to establish, via good staff-parent communication, some kind of system of regular help from mothers when necessary. In this, there may be some conflict between meeting the needs of the women, and meeting the staffing needs of the creche, but the supervision and safety of the children must take priority.

• More generally, good communications and trusting relationships between staff and mothers are essential, if women are to feel secure about leaving their children in the creche.

• Creche staff have a sometimes frustrating job, operating in the face of heavy demands from the under-threes, a lack of training for work with this age group, and often limited resources. They need support from both inside and outside the project, as well as time to develop programmes of activities which are satisfying for both the children and themselves.

It is hoped that the research carried out in 123 will begin to draw attention to the value of mother and toddler groups, and that, ultimately, we will see, among policy-makers and funders in particular, a greater level of interest in, and support for, the work which they presently struggle to do. At the same time, it is important that the practical lessons learnt within the House help and encourage others to develop their work, in order that many more women and children can take advantage, not only of *"a bit of peace and quiet"*, but of the many varied benefits which such a group can offer.

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RESOURCES

The following list is intended to serve only as a useful 'starting point' for others who are involved in organising a mother and toddler group.

GENERAL HELP

Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
127 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 1SH
Tel: 321224

Women's Centre
19a North Street Arcade, Belfast BT1 1PA
Tel: 243363 / 231676

Derry Women's Group
7 London Street, 'Derry
Tel: 267672

WOMEN

Women's Education Project
129 University Street, Belfast, BT7
Tel. 230212

Women's Information Group
115 Ormeau Road, Belfast
Tel: 246378

Worker's Educational Association
1 Fitzwilliam Street, Belfast, BT7
Tel: 329718

CHILDREN

Mobile Creche Unit
Women's Centre,
19a North Street Arcade, Belfast BT1 1AP
Tel: 243363 / 231673

Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroups Association
Unit 3, Enterprise House, Boucher Crescent, Belfast BT12 6HU
Tel: 662825

Play Resource Warehouse
88 Tomb Street, Belfast, BT1
Tel: 230708From 8th April 1991, the Play Resource Warehouse will be based at: Dunmore Industrial Estate, Alexander Park Ave., Antrim Road, Belfast, BT15 3GD
Tel: 773802

Voluntary Service Belfast
72 Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9
Tel: 329499

FUNDING

Some women's groups and mother and toddler groups have received assistance from the **Community Services Department** of their local **District** or **Borough Council**. For details of your local council, consult the telephone directory. In addition, the **Area Health and Social Services Boards** can offer advice; for further information, contact your local Social Services office.

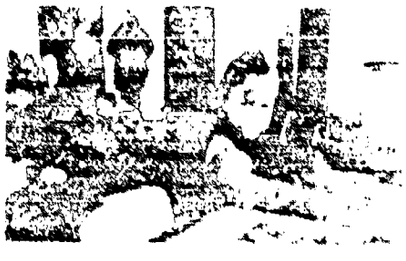
There are many sources of independent funding from **charitable trusts** in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. The following publications will be helpful:

Independent Funding for Voluntary Action: A Guide to Local Trusts
A free pamphlet listing details of local trusts, including the B.B.C.'s 'Children in Need' Appeal. Available from Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, 22 Mount Charles, Belfast, BT7 1NZ; Tel: 245927.

The Directory of Grant Making Trusts
Contains details of over 2000 charitable trusts in the United Kingdom. May be available in the reference section of your local library. Published by Charities Aid Foundation, 48 Pembury Road, Tonbridge, Kent, TN9 2JD. (Price: £47.00).

A Guide to the Major Trusts
Edited by Luke Fitzherbert
Gives details of over 300 trusts which may make grants to charities. Published by The Directory of Social Change, Radius Works, Back Lane, London, NW3 1HL.

Most trusts can only make grants for charitable purposes to groups and organisations which have charitable status. Groups can obtain recognition of charitable status from the Inland Revenue for tax and other purposes. If your group needs advice on charitable status, contact the Charities Advice Officer, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, 127 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 1SH; Tel: 321224.



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